



DIGITAL RESPONSIBILITY





In today's interconnected and increasingly technological world, it's highly likely that you and your students use technology in some capacity. Perhaps you're still conducting class completely online because of the pandemic, or maybe you're back in person but found a new appreciation for facilitating online learning.

As a generation that grew up in a world already fully enmeshed in Facebook and Instagram and with the 24-hour news cycle churning out stories day after day, your students are digital natives: individuals who are familiar with computers and technology from an early age. In the U.S. alone, nearly 91 percent of school-aged children have access to smart technology, and as of December 2018,

over four million U.S. households possessed a virtual reality device; by 2022, estimates predict there may be two billion augmented reality users worldwide (Google for Education, 2020). These numbers indicate not only the staggering amount of technology we use, but how it is becoming more embedded in our daily life.



Whether you are an avid technology user, one who prefers to stay as off the grid as possible, or somewhere in between, the reality is that our digital, interconnected society is here to stay. This means that no matter how you personally use technology, as an educator it is imperative to teach students about digital responsibility.

What is Digital Responsibility?

Digital responsibility refers to using technology in an appropriate, constructive way for oneself and others. It involves navigating a wide variety of ethical situations that relate to privacy, net neutrality, transparency, and “the digital divide,” among other challenges and situations (Sheykhjan, 2017). Just as responsibility offline is two-fold, entailing both personal and social responsibility, so too is digital responsibility: we as a society have a responsibility to each other to ensure that learners from all backgrounds have access to technology to facilitate learning (Jafari, n.d.).



Being digitally responsible requires us to be a part of a digital citizenship, which encompasses the norms of responsible and appropriate behavior online. Digital citizenship is “a way of life,” and everyone who uses the internet must understand their role and responsibilities (Ribble, 2015).

We must value the “rights, responsibilities and opportunities of living, learning and working in an interconnected digital world, and. . . engage in safe, legal and ethical behaviors” (Sheykhjan, 2017, p. 1). Navigating the online world as a digital citizen calls on us to show the same respect, compassion, and trust for our fellow citizens as does being a citizen in the “real” world.



For grades K-2, digital responsibility involves connecting students' online lives to their offline lives and finding a balance between the two. Incorporate the notions of safety into these young learners' explorations of the internet. How do they "go safely" to online spaces? What are the rules for asking permission and using devices? Try using timers to set limits for screen time and help students "say goodbye" to their devices when time is up.



For grades 3-5, introduce the idea of digital citizenship. Help them connect what it means to be an online citizen with the behaviors they demonstrate for citizenship in their offline life. Have students think about who they are online. What is their online identity, and how can that person be consistently responsible and respectful? Encourage students to safely make meaningful connections with their online communities, which can encourage them to engage more actively and foster valuable relationships. Continue reinforcing balance between online and offline time, and incorporate reflections about how technology use makes them feel.



For grades 6-8, explore what it means to find credible sources. How does the internet impact their understanding of pop culture, the news, or even their education? Introduce the idea of the digital footprint and data so students understand that the internet lasts forever and our data is not solely ours. How would they feel if a photo they posted today circulated in ten years? Have they ever received an ad for something they'd been talking about with friends? Connect online bullying and hate speech to real world consequences, and incorporate digital mindfulness as they continue exploring balance and responsible digital use.



Developing Digital Responsibility

As digital citizens, all of us—teachers and students alike—must develop digital literacy skills. Digital literacy encompasses a wide array of skills involving self-expression, advocacy, reasoning, critical thinking, communication, and, of course, responsibility (Hobbs & Cooper Moore, 2013). Children in particular need the chance to ask questions about what they see online so they understand how the cyber world works. We must instill in students a sense of critical curiosity so they know to question images, research sources, and form their own conclusions. Moreover, students require ample opportunities to practice communicating effectively and safely while using technology (Hobbs & Cooper Moore, 2013). Especially as students delve into the realm of social media, where the lexicon may be less familiar to adults, they need to develop an innate sense of right and wrong, understand the consequences for online actions, and be able to speak respectfully to others at all times.

To open a conversation about digital responsibility, ask students what the word means to them. Have them consider some of the temptations they face online, like joining message boards with strangers or posting something unkind without thinking. Once you gauge their level of understanding about the concept, provide examples of digitally responsible and irresponsible behaviors. What are their thoughts on turning in an assignment they found online? What do they think about sharing a photo of someone in an embarrassing moment? If they are feeling angry or sad, do they think it's a good or bad idea to hit post or send online?



In order to foster digital responsibility in your classroom, consider the following strategies:

- **Provide opportunities for experiential learning.** Although many students are likely digital natives, they still need to learn important lessons through experience. If you're showing students how to spot an online scam, for instance, pull together past scams along with sensational (but true!) news stories (Davis, 2017). Allow students to investigate on their own which ones are true and false, allowing them to use the internet in a way that goes beyond their social media accounts and teaches them about online safety. Have students reflect on a time that someone else's technology use, such as a post online, has made them feel happy, sad, excited, or scared. What caused those emotions? How can they be sure to use technology in a way that makes others feel happy and respected?

Make tech knowledge relevant to students' lives. When the online world is embedded in students' lives, it can be difficult for them to discern the importance of certain practices on their own. Help students understand why there are processes and norms in place when using the internet. Explain to them that a password is like locking a door—it keeps you safe. Use stories or the media to highlight how speaking with strangers online is no safer than speaking with a stranger on the street. Encourage students to think of some digital norms and explore on their own why they are important. Why do we have two-factor authentication? What real-world examples exist of someone facing negative consequences for something they said or a photo they posted online? This will help students construct their knowledge and draw connections to their own lives, in their own way.



Demonstrate how to examine sources. Youth “may lack crucial tools and abilities that enable them to seek and consume information effectively,” and thus it is important that they understand what makes a credible source: trustworthiness and expertise (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008). Students must be guided toward a skeptical curiosity when roving the internet, and they must understand the ways



that information can be distorted. Consider having groups of students research an age-appropriate news event, like books by a beloved author that have been recently shelved for bias. Assign one group to research it on a news website with a left-leaning audience, another to research it on a site with a right-leaning audience, and another to research how people are discussing it on social media. Have students present and examine the disconnect and reflect on what is a fact, what is an opinion, and which sources seem the most credible to them.

Level the playing field. Just as all students enter school with different levels of academic and social skills, they enter school with different levels of experience using technology. Don't assume what students know and don't know. When we explicitly teach technological skills, just as we do academic, social, and emotional skills, we are setting all students up to succeed in this realm.

Using technology can open a world of possibilities for our students. They have more ways to acquire knowledge, forge social connections, and create a vibrant online personality than ever before. Yet with all of this opportunity comes responsibility. Students must understand that the online world is an extension of their tangible world, and there can be both positive and negative consequences for their online behavior. When students understand how to be respectful, contributing members to their online communities, they are apt to reap all the benefits that technology has to offer.

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